



Margaret Middleton
Executive Director
Connecticut Veterans Legal Center

Written Testimony for the Comm. on Veterans' Affairs, Conn. Gen. Assembly, on SB-284

Senator Flexer, Senator Martin, Representative Hennessy, and distinguished members of the Committee on Veterans' Affairs, my name is Margaret Middleton and I'm the Co-Founder and Executive Director of the Connecticut Veterans Legal Center. Today, I'm here to testify in support of S.B. 89, which would expand eligibility for veterans' benefits to veterans with an Other-than-Honorable discharge and a diagnosis of Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder or Traumatic Brain Injury, or who have experienced Military Sexual Trauma.

Our mission at CVLC is to help veterans who have experienced homelessness and mental illnesses overcome legal barriers to housing, healthcare, and income. As the first VA medical-legal partnership in the country, we co-locate with VA medical centers to provide vital legal services to our clients. We work to ensure that our clients, among the most vulnerable populations in Connecticut, have access to the resources necessary to thrive in this state.

Currently, our clients with other-than-honorable discharges are barred from accessing critical state benefits such as transitional housing, substance abuse recovery programs, and long-term care at the Connecticut Veterans' Home in Rocky Hill. For our clients suffering from post-traumatic stress disorder, military sexual trauma, and traumatic brain injury— which in many cases may have precipitated the misbehavior leading to their discharge status – this exclusion and the accompanying stigma it creates profoundly affects their ability to adequately cope with their

condition. By expanding eligibility to this relatively small population of Connecticut residents, this bill has the potential to radically transform lives.

I'll share the experience of one of CVLC's clients to give you a sense of why you should urgently pass this bill. A young veteran I'll call Bill, was referred to CVLC for help with his discharge status. Bill had been diagnosed and treated for post-traumatic stress following sexual assault in the military. He was under review for medical separation due to his PTSD when he tested positive for drug use and discharged with an Other Than Honorable characterization. Following separation, Bill – a veteran known to the DoD to have disabling PTSD – was left without the benefit of VA medical care or help from the state of Connecticut even though he was homeless and suffering. Although CVLC was able to establish service connection that now makes Bill eligible for VA treatment of PTSD, that took a full year from the date that we met him until VA granted his claim. We consider a year incredibly fast turn around; we routinely work with clients for years before they are able to access VA care, if they win at all. During that year, or more, access to state services including housing and substance abuse treatment could save the lives of veterans like Bill.

S.B. 89 would provide Connecticut veterans struggling with mental illness and experiences of trauma with the resources necessary to overcome many of the barriers they face in securing housing, healthcare, and income. After more than 8 years of serving this population through CVLC, it is abundantly clear that such resources benefit not only the individual veterans who receive them, but also the families, and communities that are trying to fill in the gaps. Dismissing and refusing to care for injured veterans stains the honor our federal agencies; SB 89 gives Connecticut the opportunity to fulfill the promise we make to care for all veterans.